

Humanizing Certitudes and Impoverishing Doubts: A Critique of *The Closing of the American Mind*

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At the end of July 1987, Mark McGwire, of Claremont, California, and the Oakland As, had hit 37 home runs, and led both major leagues. He had equaled the home run record for rookies in the American League, and was only one short of the National League record. Records, however, are for full seasons, and young Mr. McGwire still had nearly half the year's games to play. He is without question what in sports is called a "Feenom."

At about the time McGwire was taking his first turn at bat that spring, a book entitled *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Allan Bloom, was published. Its rise to the top of the nonfiction best seller list has been as explosive as young McGwire's bat. Its staying power at the top of that list—extending over many months—is no less astonishing than its swift anabasis. The demand for it is widespread—radiating outwards from Chicago, New York, Boston, and Washington (not to mention Paris, where it is said to be going like "hot crêpes")—to top most regional lists, as well as the national. It is surely as much a "Feenom," as any event in recent sports history.

Whatever the ultimate judgment may be as to the book's merits, there can be no doubt that its tremendous sales are evidence that it has touched an exposed nerve of public concern. Something, no doubt, must be conceded to the fact that its "defense" of traditional morality is accompanied by a great deal of prurient denunciation of immorality—like the famous reformer who, at the turn of the century, made highly publicized invasions of the red light districts of New York City. His church was always jammed on the ensuing Sundays, when his congregation (as well as numerous reporters) assembled to hear of his virtuous forays into these dens of iniquity. With much greater sophistication, Bloom also preaches, and does it very well.

Meanwhile [that is, in the wake of women's "liberation"] one of the strongest, oldest motives for marriage is no longer operative. Men can now easily enjoy the sex that

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previously could be had only in marriage. It is strange that the tireddest and stupidest bromide mothers and fathers preached to their daughters—"He won't respect you or marry you if you give him what he wants too easily"—turns out to be the truest and most probing analysis of the current situation (p. 132).

Reading the first part of *The Closing of the American Mind*, with its discussion—along the foregoing lines—of such topics as "Equality," "Race," "Sex," "Divorce," "Love," and "Eros," one is forcibly struck by its resemblance to the moral (as distinct from theological) aspects of the sermons of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and the homilies of the Rev. Pat Robertson. Bloom is certainly correct about relativism seducing young women—thereby saving their boyfriends that trouble. And he is also right in pointing to the other—and much greater—troubles that young men find themselves in, when in the company of their "liberated" women. If all moral choices are "values" and all are equally unsupported by reason—or by revelation, which becomes just another "opinion" or "value"—then all moral choices are equally significant, or insignificant. Thus Bloom quotes young women as saying that sex is "no big deal." Yet the truth is that sex is always a big deal, and those who think and act otherwise, leave an ever-widening trail of disaster, disease, and death in their wake.

There is, however, one surprising omission in Bloom's catalogue of the evils of relativism. He is vigorous in his portrayal of the human cost of sexual promiscuity, as the foregoing quotation indicates. Yet his observations of the aberrations of the counterculture seem frozen in "The Sixties," as the title of his most memorable chapter suggests. (Bloom left Cornell for Toronto at the end of that decade, and remained in self-imposed exile for most of the decade that followed.) His remarks about feminism, and the changing roles of men and women, for example, are dated not because they are mistaken, or irrelevant, but because in the intervening years the so-called "gay rights" movement, which Bloom hardly mentions, has emerged as the most radical and sinister challenge, not merely to sexual morality, but to all morality.

As I have argued in "Sodomy and the Academy: The Assault on the Family and Morality by 'Liberation' Ethics" (*American Conservatism and the American Founding*, Carolina Academic Press, 1984, pp. 263–78), the demand for the recognition of sodomy as both a moral and a legal right represents the most complete repudiation—theoretical as well as practical—of all objective standards of human conduct. The reason why we regard the killing of other human beings—but not the killing of cattle—as murder, is because we are members of the same species. That is to say, we share a common nature. The reason we regard the enslavement of human beings—but not of cattle—as wrong, is because we recognize an equality of rights among fellow members of the same species. This is also the reason for regarding racial or religious or even sex discrimination as wrong. Every moral distinction that can be called to mind can, I believe, be shown to have the same origin or ground, including the very idea of human rights—to which the sodomites and lesbians themselves appeal. But the word nature means generation. A species is defined by the presence in it of individuals of opposite sexes who can generate new individuals of the same species. Nature is the ground of all morality, but maleness and femaleness is the ground of nature.

The Bible, in describing man as created in the image of God, adds "male and female created he them," implying that God's own existence is grounded in the same distinction as nature's. The so-called "gay rights" movement is then the ultimate repudiation of nature, and therewith the ground of all morality. Of course, sodomy has been around for a long time—as we know from the Bible. What we are faced with here is not a demand that homosexuality be a private matter between consenting adults. We are faced with a public demand for the admission into law and morality of an equal right of homosexuality and heterosexuality. There has never in my experience been anything like the Gay and Lesbian Centers, now on virtually every campus—with a GLAD week (Gay and Lesbian Awareness Days) sanctioned and encouraged by the college administrations, and patronized by local (and even national) politicians. I have been teaching many more years than Bloom, and I have never seen students as morally confused as they are today. It is difficult enough for young people, as Bloom shows so well, to have to work out anew, with no authoritative conventions, the roles to be followed in boy/girl, man/woman relationships. But this difficulty is compounded a thousand times, when the boy/girl, man/woman relationship is itself called into question. This is as much as to say, that whether you want to belong to the human race is now a matter of personal preference. Tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of students across the country, who never had the least homosexual tendencies, have been seduced (and their lives ruined) by the overpowering pressure of the official patronage of the gay rights propaganda. Many young men, who do not know how to deal with "liberated" women, and many "liberated" women, who do not know how to deal with men any more (except as enemies), take refuge in sodomy and lesbianism. This has constituted the great moral crisis of the eighties on American campuses, and Bloom is almost entirely silent about it.

The chronology of the AIDS epidemic corresponds precisely with this public movement to establish sodomy and lesbianism as a recommended lifestyle. In nothing has the power of relativism—and the disgrace of American higher education—manifested itself more than in its endorsement of homosexuality. But whatever the attitude of the educational authorities, God and nature have exacted terrible retribution. This lifestyle has proved to be a deathstyle. For the first time since modern relativism has mounted its assault upon man's humanity, chastity and the monogamous family may be seen to be recovering some of their standing. Unfortunately, the new argument for the old ways is entirely based upon the argument for self-preservation. This argument will not survive the discovery of new scientific cures. Last spring I told a class of freshmen (and women) that there was a race on, between God and science, for their moral allegiance. And, I added, somewhat sententiously, that it would be very unwise for them ever to bet against God. A few years ago, this remark would have provoked gales of laughter. This time I looked out upon the most solemn faces I had ever seen! Thanks to AIDS then, we have a little breathing time to reassert the true arguments—the "enriching certitudes" (as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*), not merely Bloom's "humanizing doubts." Morality must be seen, as Aristotle sees it, as a means to implement the desire for happiness, and not merely as a restraint upon the desire

for pleasure. The arguments must be made not only as to how one may avoid a bad death, but how one can pursue a good life. But one will not find those arguments in *The Closing of the American Mind*.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, Bloom speaks eloquently and even wisely of the evils of relativism. And, to the surprise and pleasure of many, it turns out that he is not just another Bible thumper. (I do not mean to suggest that these are to be despised, but only that they have no standing in our "elite" universities.) He is, rather, of all things, a professor of political philosophy, pointing to his fellow university teachers as the source of this poisonous and literally demoralizing doctrine. This surely must go a long way towards accounting for the book's apparently wide appeal to middle America. Yet those who turn to Bloom for solace and guidance are apt to find their optimism short-lived. Having eloquently portrayed the disastrous consequences of relativism he does not advocate a return to those standards of human conduct implied in its rejection and, most notably, in his own invocation and praise of the ancient "bromides" concerning chastity. Thus he writes

It is not the immorality of relativism that I find appalling. What is astounding and degrading is the dogmatism with which we accept such relativism, and the easy going lack of concern about what that means for our lives (p. 329).

In one issue of *Insight* magazine, as well as in feature stories in *The Washington Times*, Bloom was hailed as "the general in the war against relativism." But those who thus hailed him seemed to assume that his critique of relativism implied a stand in favor of traditional morality. If so, they did not read him with sufficient care—or astuteness. Bloom does not, repeat not, find "the immorality of relativism . . . appalling." What Bloom rejects is only "easy going" relativism.

When Bloom looks at the "low" in the light of the "high," the "high" turns out to be the "extraordinary thought and philosophical greatness" of German nihilism. One might say that American relativism is comic in its blandness and indifference to the genuine significance of human choice, whereas in its German version fundamental human choices take on the agonized dignity of high tragedy. But none of Bloom's philosophical heroes—for example, Nietzsche or Heidegger—wrote tragedies. Shakespeare did. And Bloom himself once wrote extraordinarily well on *Othello*. (See *Shakespeare's Politics*, by Allan Bloom, with Harry V. Jaffa, Basic Books, 1964, Chapter 3. See especially, pp. 53ff.) Desdemona cannot imagine that a woman would betray her husband even "for the whole world." One can only surmise how students for whom sex is "no big deal" read the play. One guesses only that for them it is a black comedy about crazy people. The greatness of *Othello* is inextricably bound up with the fact—once so powerfully expounded by Bloom himself—that the covenantal act of choice of partners in marriage reproduces the covenantal act of choice of the Children of Israel by the God of Israel. Bloom wants to turn his students from their "impoverishing certitudes" to "humanizing doubts." But it seems to me that his own argument requires rather that "impoverishing certitudes" be replaced by "enriching certitudes." After all, it was a necessary condition of the tragedy in *Othello* that there be no doubt whatever in the minds of Othello and Desdemona as to the absolute significance of fidelity in marriage. "Humanizing doubt," no less than any other

kind, would dissolve the tragedy into a tale of silly mistakes. It seems to me that Nietzsche's and Heidegger's theoretical teaching is far more profoundly subversive of the universe of Shakespearean tragedy, than the sitcoms of Woody Allen, which draw so much of Bloom's attention. And we must ask the same Bloom who recommended the "bromide" about chastity, whether a young woman would be more or less apt to benefit from it, if her cheap generic drugstore relativism had been replaced by the high and tragic nihilism—the parent of all relativism—of Nietzsche and Heidegger? Do we really want her to look into the abyss of nothingness and agonize over whether to have sex with her boyfriend? As Bloom must know from the literature (to borrow a familiar phrase of Leo Strauss), the outcome, in at least nine times out of ten, will be the same, whether the girl agonizes first, or just hops into bed. Thus Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things [viz., passions such as spite, shamelessness, envy, and actions such as adultery, theft, murder] depend upon committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong (1107a15ff.).

Aristotle directs the argument of his *Ethics* only to those whose characters are already formed by basic moral education. He does not suppose that liberal education should form the basis of moral choice—on the contrary, he supposes that moral education should form the basis of liberal education. Bloom, it seems to me, has got it exactly backwards.

A moving passage in *The Closing of the American Mind*, and the one that to me conveys Bloom's critique of relativism most effectively, is the following:

My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things in it, not only what was specifically ritual, found their origins in the Bible's commandments, and their explanation in the Bible's stories and the commentaries on them, and had their imaginative counterparts in the deeds of the myriad of exemplary heroes. My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. Their simple faith and practices linked them to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material, not from outside or from an alien perspective, but believing as they did, while simply going deeper and providing guidance. There was real respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief (p. 60).

I do not remember a more eloquent evocation of the idea of authoritative tradition, and of how it dignifies human life. Of course, Bloom is referring to the Jewish tradition—the most conservative of all traditions, beginning as it does "in the beginning." I am confident that Bloom's grandparents—like my grandparents—found a home for that tradition within the American political tradition that for them was represented by Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. I am sure that they felt, as did Moses Seixas, sexton of Newport's Touro Synagogue in 1790, on the occasion of Washington's visit to Newport. He hailed Washington as another Joshua who had been led by the Lord, as he himself had led the American people into the Promised Land of this new Zion of political and religious freedom. For American Jews at the time of the Revolution—and even for those today who have not become victims of a university education—have

always seen this nation as also a chosen nation. From the beginning, America as the new Israel, as a light to lighten all the nations, concerning the principles of political and religious liberty, has been a theme of public discourse. And for the very reason that America could become a Zion to all the nations, it could become a Zion to the Jews themselves. George Washington's letter to the Touro Synagogue represented the first time in more than 2,000 years that Jews had been recognized as citizens of any nation. It represented the first time in human history that Jews had been recognized, as equal and fellow citizens of a non-Jewish polity. And that recognition was authoritative because it came from the one man who, as President and Head of State, and as Father of his Country, surpassed all others in moral authority. Washington's greeting to the Jews recognized them as possessing not only a technical legal equality, but as equal human participants, under the One God, in the moral and providential order which was the source of all the nation's blessings. Let me just add here, that Lincoln's greatest speeches are characterized by the combination into a peculiarly American synthesis of the moral and providential order of the Bible, and of the no less moral and no less providential order of the Declaration of Independence. In Lincoln's second inaugural address we see in absolute perfection an authoritative tradition encompassing the teachings of the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—and the teachings of the Revolution. I am confident that Bloom's grandparents understood this, in their humble—but profound—way. Why then does Bloom look only abroad, to that acid solvent of all traditions, German nihilism, for that which is already his by right of inheritance?

Here is the denouement of Bloom's genuinely poetic—and nostalgic—tribute to his grandparents.

I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are M.D.'s or Ph.D.'s, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire. I am not saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based upon the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics, and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished (p. 60).

Bloom says that his generation—his cousins—have no “comparable learning” to that of their grandparents. But why does Bloom assume without argument that there is any learning “comparable” to the Torah and the Talmud? Bloom makes no attempt to understand his grandparents as they understood themselves, and he tacitly rejects their way of life, even as he recognizes in it something rich and wonderful that is lacking in his own.

Bloom's evocation of his grandparents is touching, but it is barren. He denies that he is saying “anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by.” What then is he saying? That “a life based on the Book is closer to the truth [and] . . . provides . . . access to the real nature of things?” But what is the source or ground of knowledge that enables Bloom to judge the Bible's proximity

to the truth? According to Leo Strauss, the concept of "nature" is a discovery of philosophy, and is alien to the Old Testament. By asserting that the world is created by God, the Torah denies that there is a self-subsisting reality independent of the will of God. Of course, rabbinic Judaism, like medieval Christianity, assimilated the idea of "the laws of nature and of nature's God" within the framework of Creation. The perfect expression of this assimilation is of course in our own Declaration of Independence. Bloom's easy going judgment of the truth of the Bible is however—from the viewpoint of the Bible itself—a judgment of the high in the light of the low.

"Without the great revelations," Bloom writes, ". . . there is nothing to see out there . . ." The descent of the Bible is now explicit—to being only one of many "revelations." And such "revelations" are now lower case "books," along with "epics" and "philosophies." We need them says Bloom, "as part of our natural vision." But books are artifacts. If, however, artifacts determine the content of our vision, if without these artifacts there is nothing to see, then visual reality is in truth an artifact. "Natural vision" would then be an illusion, although not an optical illusion (since there is no optical reality)! Conversely, if there is such a thing as natural vision, then there must be natural objects of sense perception, and of knowledge. And the existence and perception of these must be independent of books. Books then would be accounts of reality, or interpretations of reality, but not themselves the ground of the reality of which they speak. To say that without books there is nothing to see, is nihilism. Yet Bloom's nihilism, manifest in these words, is, as we have seen, contradicted by his reference to both "natural vision" and "the real nature of things." This contradiction runs throughout his book from beginning to end.

Although the title of the book speaks of an "American Mind," there is in truth little or nothing American about the mind or minds that are characterized, other than Bloom's reports about his students. Bloom writes in the tradition of the great expatriates: Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and (in a somewhat different sense) Henry Adams. He reminds one of the avant-garde Parisian-Bohemians of the 1920s that included Joyce and Hemingway. He can breathe freely only in the presence of the symbols (and ruins) of Europe's aristocratic past. American democracy, as Americans themselves have understood it, is a closed book to him.

Bloom writes often about French and German philosophy and literature. Names drop upon his pages like summer flies. There are the great modern thinkers—Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. There are the more literary types, Ibsen, Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Kafka, Céline, Molière, Flaubert, Schiller, and of course Goethe. There is not a single reference to Cooper or Hawthorne or Emerson or Whitman or Howells. Nor any to Dreiser or Sinclair Lewis or Edith Wharton or Willa Cather. Thoreau is mentioned, but only because he represented a "side of Rousseau's thought . . ." (p. 171). Above all, there is nothing about Melville or Mark Twain! In "Tom Sawyer: Hero of Middle America," (*Interpretation*, Spring 1972, reprinted in *The Conditions of Freedom*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) I attempted to capture the art by which Mark Twain had transformed Plutarchian into Machiavellian (and

Lockean) heroism, how in *Tom Sawyer* we see the regime refounded, how we witness the coming into being of a "new order, of which Tom is a new prince [and where] the boy is father of the man, and the old are ruled by the young." Tom may be a rogue, but he is a charming one. Bloom's Tom Sawyer is Céline's Robinson, the hero of *Journey to the End of the Night*, described as an "utterly selfish liar, cheat, and murderer for pay" (p. 239).

Bloom complains loud and long that Americans do not have national books that form and represent national character, as do Frenchmen or Germans or Italians or the English. There is some justification for this complaint. But that is because the genius of America as a civilization is above all to be found in its political institutions, and its greatest writers have been its greatest political men, Jefferson and Lincoln and Washington. The American book of books, is the story of America itself, as the story of the secular redemption of mankind.

It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the motherland [said Lincoln on his way to Washington in February of 1861] but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men and that all should have an equal chance.¹

Lincoln's metaphor, of course, was that of Christian, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, with the great pack on his back—representing original sin. In the Gettysburg Address the messianic theme would be consummated in the transformation of the death on the battlefield into the rebirth of the nation. What national poetry has ever surpassed that of Lincoln? When did epic poetry and poetic tragedy ever so coincide in the actual life story of a people—a coincidence in itself no less improbable than that of philosophy and kingship—than in the movement of thought and of events from the Revolution to the Civil War?

Of course it is the themes of the Civil War that supplied the themes of America's greatest literary works. *Huckleberry Finn* confronts convention with nature, and slavery with freedom, in a uniquely American poetic transformation of the teachings of Rousseau. It is one that, I believe, equals, if it does not surpass anything that European literature of the last 200 years can show. The great white whale, like the weight that Lincoln wished to see lifted from the shoulders of men, is also a distinctively American confrontation of the problem of evil, within the framework of Biblical allegory ("Call me Ishmael"). *Moby Dick* too is a "people's book"—as much in the tradition of the *Iliad* and of the *Odyssey*—as any modern book could be. Of either of them, however, Bloom says nothing. There is irony too in the Foreword by Saul Bellow, who seems only to have this in common with Bloom: that "European observers sometimes classify me as a hybrid curiosity, neither fully American nor satisfactorily European, stuffed with references to the philosophers, the historians, and poets I had consumed higgledy-piggledy . . ." (pp. 14, 15).

Bloom writes:

Reading Thucydides shows us that the decline of Greece was purely political, that what we call intellectual history is of little importance for understanding it. Old

regimes had traditional roots, but philosophy and science took over as rulers in modernity, and purely theoretical problems have decisive political effects. One cannot imagine modern political history without a discussion of Locke, Rousseau and Marx (p. 197).

Leaving aside the begged question of what is meant by "purely political" history, can one imagine a discussion of "modern political history" that is *only* "a discussion of Locke, Rousseau, and Marx"? Elsewhere Bloom asserts that

What was acted out in the American and French Revolutions had been thought out beforehand in the writings of Locke and Rousseau, the scenarists for the drama of modern politics (p. 162).

He adds that Hobbes had "led the way" and, as he proceeds, it becomes clear that he regards Locke as essentially Hobbes with a fig leaf covering the hedonism, atheism, and materialism that is so prominent in the former, but no less essential although concealed in the latter. We will return to this point presently. But think of it, the American and French Revolutions "scenarios" written by Locke and Rousseau! The embattled farmers who "fired the shot heard round the world" and the great protagonists in the world historical events that followed—Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, are mere actors, following a script. Do we not have here an historical determinism equal to Hegel's? Only the "cunning of history" is replaced by the cunning of the modern philosophers. But this is the purest nonsense.

Leaving the French Revolution to others, I comment only on the American Revolution and the American Founding. The statesmen of the era, among them those just mentioned, were, if not "a graver bench than ever frowned in Greece" or Rome, certainly the equal of any (*Coriolanus*, III.i, 106). And they possessed a core of conviction which—if we are to make any attempt to understand them as they understood themselves—formed the basis of everything they did. Bloom purports to write about "the American mind." But he is perfectly oblivious of the presence of this expression in one of the most famous documents of American history. In a letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, Thomas Jefferson explained the sources, the purpose, and the manner of the writing of what Lincoln would call that "immortal emblem of humanity," and Calvin Coolidge (observing in 1926 the sesquicentennial of the event) called "the most important civil document in the world."

But with respect to our rights and the acts of the British government contravening those rights, there was but one opinion on this side of the water. All American whigs thought alike on these subjects. When forced therefore to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments . . . but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject; in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent . . . neither aiming at originality of principle nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversations, in letters, printed essays or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc. . . .²

We must ourselves lay the greatest emphasis upon Jefferson's emphasis upon the "one opinion" on this side of the water. There really was a "public philosophy" at the time of the Revolution and the Founding. The party conflict of the 1790s exceeded in intensity anything that has come after—even that of the decade before the Civil War. Yet Jefferson, in his inaugural address in 1801, could say "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Federalists, we are all Republicans." To speak as Jefferson did, in the letter to Lee, of the "harmonizing sentiments of the day," is to imply a consensus transcending the normal differences of opinion among a free people. Of "the elementary books of public right" mentioned by Jefferson, two are ancient, two are modern. I think it safe to assume that according to Jefferson's understanding of the American mind, that mind found harmonizing sentiments among the books of public right no less than among the conversations, letters, and printed essays. Certainly that would suggest that Americans then read John Locke's *Second Treatise* in its "harmonizing" sense, in which Locke quotes Hooker for authority for his doctrine, and through Hooker reaches back to Christian scholasticism, and through it to Aristotle.

Bloom not only believes that the English and American Revolutions were scenarios by Locke—he says that "the new English and American regimes founded themselves according to his [Locke's] instructions" (p. 162). According to Bloom one can save oneself all the trouble of reading political and constitutional history—like Bloom—and just read Locke. But how does Bloom read Locke?

"Perhaps the most important discovery" upon which Locke's teaching was based, according to Bloom, was that "there was no Garden of Eden . . . Man was not provided for at the beginning . . . God neither looks after him nor punishes him. Nature's indifference to justice is a terrible bereavement for man. He must [therefore] care for himself." (p. 163). The complete break with Biblical religion, as well as with classical philosophy, as represented by Aristotle and Cicero, is the necessary presupposition of Bloom's Locke.

Once the world has been purged of ghosts or spirits, [meaning of any belief in God or immortality] it reveals to us that the critical problem is scarcity . . . What is required is not brotherly love or faith, hope, and charity, but self-interested rational labor (p. 165).

"Americans" says Bloom,

are Lockeans: recognizing that work is necessary (no longing for a nonexistent Eden), and will produce well-being; following their natural inclinations moderately, not because they possess the virtue of moderation but because their passions are balanced and they recognize the reasonableness of that; respecting the rights of others so that theirs will be respected . . . From the point of view of God or heroes, all this is not very inspiring. But for the poor, the weak, the oppressed—the overwhelming majority of mankind—it is the promise of salvation. As Leo Strauss put it, the moderns "built on low but solid ground" (p. 167).

We need not dispute Bloom's interpretation of Locke to deny that the American mind has ever been the mind represented by that interpretation. Let us however turn here to Bloom's obiter dicta at the end of the foregoing passage. This is his only mention (or quotation) of Leo Strauss, although Strauss's words and Strauss's thoughts echo and re-echo (without attribution) throughout his book. However,

as Kirk Emmert recently reminded me, the words attributed to Strauss are not Strauss's but Churchill's—albeit words Strauss himself frequently quoted. But can a regime to which a Churchill could give such unstinting devotion—a regime in whose finest hour so many would come to owe so much to so few; a regime whose glory would not be of a day, but of a thousand years—be a regime despised by God and heroes?

Bloom is the first person I have ever known to suggest that "the point of view of God" is adverse or indifferent to "the poor, the weak, the oppressed." How can a regime which Bloom himself calls the "promise of salvation" for "the overwhelming majority of mankind" be anything but a theme for the greatest heroism? Why did the Union armies march to battle singing, "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free . . ." Why did Churchill himself leave orders for the singing of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, in Westminster Abbey, at his funeral? Abraham Lincoln is reported as saying that God must have loved the common people—he made so many of them. But who that has ever read either the Prophets of the Old Testament, or the Sermon on the Mount in the New, could have said what Bloom says here? And may not "rational labor" be in service of faith, hope, and charity? I am sure that Bloom's grandparents thought so. Bloom's own account of the success of American Lockeanism is testimony to the proposition that this is precisely the kind of regime that the God of the Bible, who cares for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed would favor. Bloom to the contrary notwithstanding this is the kind of God most Americans have always believed in. This is what they believe when they sing "God bless America."

Let us again consult Jefferson, at his inaugural, declaring of the American mind that it is one

enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter . . . (p. 333).

As far as I can see, everything Bloom says on the subject of the American Founding is derived from his readings of Hobbes, Locke, or Tocqueville. I have found not a word of serious interpretation—apart from his birdseed scatterings—coming from an American source: not Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Hamilton, or Lincoln. No one has maintained more persistently than I have, during the past thirty-five years, the importance in the American Founding of Locke's teachings—as they were understood and incorporated into their handiwork by the Founding Fathers. But to say that a radical atheism discovered in Locke's esoteric teaching was part of what they understood, believed, and incorporated into their regime—when every single document bearing on the question contradicts it, and there is not a shred of evidence to support it—is just plain crazy.

Bloom writes:

It should be noted that sex is a theme hardly mentioned in the thought underlying the American Founding. There it is all preservation, not procreation, because fear is more powerful than love, and men prefer their lives to their pleasures (p. 187).

Surely no sillier remark has ever been made in a work purporting to be serious. One can only wonder what Bloom could have in mind: a treatise on the joy of sex by the Father of his country? Something to vindicate the symbolism of the Washington monument? In point of fact, Benjamin Franklin penned some of the raciest lines of the 18th century. And Jefferson's "Dialogue Between the Head and the Heart," although in no way indecorous, is nonetheless highly charged with the passions that are its subject. That moreover was written in Paris, and during Jefferson's romance with Maria Conway. I'm sure Bloom would have approved, if only he had known about it.

But Bloom writes about the thought *underlying* the Founding. And what he says can refer only to the thought of Thomas Hobbes. For it was only that old bachelor for whom self-preservation meant individual self-preservation, and who divorced preservation from procreation, the family, and civil society. What is true of the political thought of Thomas Hobbes is not however true of the American Founding. It is not even true of Locke. The centrality of property in Locke's teaching gives place as well to the family, as the object of self-preservation. Nor is it true of nature generally—notwithstanding Bloom's Hobbesian remarks about fear and love. In nature generally self-preservation is directed to the species rather than to the individual. A cock robin will attack a cat that comes too near the nest where the hen is brooding. In the case of humans, the instinct of self-preservation may be transferred from the family to the political community, as the guarantor of the family. But whatever the behavior of particular individuals, the instinct of self-preservation is almost never understood to be directed by nature to the preservation of the individual as such. Consider the following from the 43rd *Federalist*—which happens to be the central number. Madison writes, with respect to the question of the right of the Convention to scrap the Articles, rather than revise them, that it is to be

answered at once by recurring to the absolute necessity of the case; to the great principle of self-preservation; to the transcendent law of nature and of nature's God, which declares that the safety and happiness of society are the objects at which all political institutions aim, and to which all such institutions must be sacrificed.³

There is no question that "the great principle of self-preservation" refers to "the safety and happiness of *society*," and not to individuals. Moreover, in using the very words of the Declaration of Independence, Madison gives us a gloss on that document as well, and on "the common sense of the subject." There is then no contradiction—as some have supposed—between the unalienable right to life, proclaimed in the second paragraph of the Declaration, and the mutual pledge of the Signers, to each other, of "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." It would have been inconceivable to them that the right to life, with which they had been endowed by their Creator, was a right to act basely, to save their skins at any cost. Moreover, the law of nature, as stated by Madison, is dedicated to the ends of safety and happiness, the alpha and omega of political life. This is in entire agreement with Aristotle's *Politics*. The teaching of the Founding, expressed in the Declaration and the *Federalist*, takes nature as the ground of political life in the teleological sense, not in the non-moral purposeless sense of modern science. Bloom has completely misread not only the American Founding, but all political

life, since he does not read political speeches to discover the form of the consciousness of political men. He assumes that political men are mere epigones of philosophers—whether they know it or not. The political nature of man is however understood by the Founders—if one reads what they say, and not only what Hobbes or Locke or Kant say—in the light of the inequality of man and beast, as well as in the light of the inequality of man and God. This understanding corresponds very closely with the first book of the *Politics*, and as it does with the first chapter of *Genesis*. But such inequalities imply that morality and the principles of political right are grounded in a purposeful reality accessible to reason, one that corresponds as well to the teachings of biblical faith. When Madison speaks of the sacrifice of all institutions to the safety and happiness of society, he implies a fortiori that the safety and happiness of individuals may or must be sacrificed too. For the Founders, the safety or happiness of society—that is to say, of a society constructed according to the principles of legitimacy and right set forth in the Declaration of Independence—always takes precedence over the mere interests or subjective judgments of individuals. That is why Lincoln in 1861, while conceding that the citizens of the seceding States possessed the same right of revolution as their Revolutionary ancestors, denied that they ought to exercise that right for any purpose inconsistent with the purposes for which their ancestors had exercised that right. To extend slavery was inconsistent with the purposes of the Revolution. The Founding Fathers, no more than Aristotle, could conceive of a life worth living without friendship. The baseness of self-preservation at any cost—the principle of Hobbesianism—as a *moral* principle, was beyond their imagination. Hence for them there could be no interest in self-preservation separate from or independent of the survival and well-being of everything they loved. In truth, fear is not more powerful than love.

The Founding Fathers, as one of the most exceptional generations of political men who ever lived, are not to be understood as primarily Hobbesians, Lockeans, or Aristotelians. They were rather *phronimoi*, morally and politically wise men, the kind of characters from whom Aristotle himself drew his portraits of the moral and political virtues. And Aristotle understood what these virtues were, not from speculative thought as such, but from contemplating such actual examples of the virtues as came under his observation. The source of his ability to recognize these virtues, was not philosophy, but nature, the reality which was the ground of philosophy. Bloom looks to philosophy only as the source of "humanizing doubts". For him, political philosophy is nothing more nor less than the cleverly disguised question, What have you done for me lately? But men who lead revolutions, who found and preserve states, cannot be guided only by their doubts. They require convictions. And they do not look upon themselves as responsible only to those who raise doubts about those convictions. Looking only to books, politics for Bloom is a closed book. And no one can comment instructively on the relationship between political life and the philosophic life who does not know what political life is.

The vitality of classical political philosophy—why it is so close to the spirit of the statesmanship of the American Founding—is that it is grounded in the reality of political life itself. In the light of that reality one does not speak of rights

divorced from right. There can be no such thing as a right to do wrong—as Lincoln said when he denied that the consent of the governed could justify the extension of slavery. And we must never forget, as Lincoln never forgot, that the rights Americans valued so highly were the rights with which they had been endowed by their Creator. Their duty to respect the rights of others did not ensue—as Bloom, following Hobbes, thinks—solely because it was to their advantage, however enlightened the self-interest which dictated that advantage. Their duty to respect the rights of others was part of their duty to God—a duty which was entirely unconditional. Hence Jefferson, in the *Notes on Virginia*,

And can the liberties of a people be thought secure, when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath?

Concerning the central event in American history—in which Abraham Lincoln found entirely plausible Jefferson's prophetic judgment concerning the wrath of God for the sin of slavery—Bloom has this to say:

The only quarrel in our history that really involved fundamental differences was over slavery. But even the proponents of slavery hardly dared assert that some human beings are made by nature to serve other human beings, as did Aristotle; they had to deny the humanity of the blacks. Besides, that question was really already settled with the Declaration of Independence. Black slavery was an aberration that had to be extinguished, not a permanent feature of our national life. Not only slavery, but aristocracy, monarchy and theocracy were laid to rest by the Declaration and the Constitution (p. 248).

Except for Russell Kirk's allocution excommunicating the Declaration of Independence (" . . . not conspicuously American . . . not even characteristically Jeffersonian . . . not a work of political philosophy or an instrument of government") I cannot recall another place in which so few words encompassed such great errors.⁴

We note first of all Bloom's thesis: that our "differences of principles are very small compared to those over which men used to fight" (p. 248). This opinion was certified by Tocqueville (who visited here in the early 1830s and who died before the Civil War). It is therefore canonical for Bloom. It is nonetheless mistaken. I remember in 1940 trying to tutor in English a refugee Polish university professor. I finally abandoned the effort. My pupil had a German English textbook that he had brought with him from Europe, and he simply would not accept anything I told him about the English language that did not agree with his German authority!

Bloom cannot form or accept an opinion about the United States that has not come to him from a European source. Tocqueville was a great and wise writer but, as Aristotle says of the discourses of Socrates, however brilliant, original, and searching they may have been, "it is difficult to be right about everything" (*Politics* 1265a14). It hardly seems to detract from Tocqueville's greatness to say that he is not the greatest interpreter of a war he did not live to see. Bloom writes about the "fundamental differences" in the Civil War, yet there is no attempt to characterize those differences. He ignores the pronouncements of Lincoln, which represent the peak of what is American, pronouncements that belong in the company of Demosthenes, Cicero, and Burke. Leo Strauss believed the

Gettysburg Address to be a greater funeral oration than that of Pericles, just as Lincoln was clearly a greater war leader. In the Preface to the University of Chicago Press reprint of *Crisis of the House Divided* I noted that I had first encountered the Lincoln–Douglas debates in 1946 when I was reading Plato's *Republic* with Leo Strauss. I was astonished to discover that the issue between Lincoln and Douglas was identical in principle with that between Socrates and Thrasymachus. For Douglas's doctrine of popular sovereignty was simply the democratic form of the proposition that justice was the interest of the stronger.

We in Illinois . . . tried slavery [said Douglas], kept it up for twelve years, and finding that it was not profitable, we abolished it for that reason . . . (Joint debate, Alton, Illinois, October 15, 1858. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. III, p. 297).

Whatever the people think is in their interest, said Douglas, they may vote in, and whatever they think is not in their interest, they may vote out. This is exactly what Thrasymachus thought democratic justice to be. This implies, of course, that when the tyrant does what is in his interest, he is being neither more nor less just than the people. Tyrannical justice is no less justice than democratic justice. In Douglas's version of popular sovereignty—as in the Southern version—the distinction between tyrannical and democratic justice disappears. But Lincoln thought differently. Like Socrates (and Plato and Aristotle) he thought that the principles of natural justice limited—as they ought to guide—human choice. There is a distant echo of *Crisis of the House Divided* when Bloom writes (p. 29) that "for Lincoln . . . there could be no compromise with the *principle* of equality, that it did not depend on the people's choice or election but is the condition of their having elections in the first place . . ." But Bloom sees Lincoln's argument as a demand for consistency, a demand that the people defer to the logic of the principle of their regime. But he does not inquire into the status of that principle or of the regime embodying it: is it theirs because it is right, or is it merely right for them because it is theirs? Bloom never asks. He never entertains the possibility that the foundation of this allegedly "low" regime is, as Lincoln believed it to be, "an abstract truth applicable to all men and all times" (*Ibid.*, 111, p. 376).

To the best of my knowledge, the election of 1800 in the United States was the first time in human history that a national government was replaced by its bitter political enemies on the basis of a free election. Those who lost their offices gave them up without any physical struggle. Those who gained the offices did nothing to proscribe—to execute, imprison, expropriate, or exile—those who lost. And those who lost looked forward confidently to a future in which they or others like themselves might again hold those offices. We are so accustomed to such blessings in what we are pleased to call the free world, that we fail to appreciate the uniqueness of this event, and to realize how much everything we hold dear depended upon the successful test of the principles of the Declaration of Independence in the election of 1800.

It is well to bear in mind that in the Glorious Revolution in England in 1689 the King was driven into exile just because there was no constitutional way of changing the chief executive on the basis of the elections to Parliament. Although

that Revolution established the principle of Parliamentary supremacy, the King (or Queen) remained the executive head of the government until after the Reform Act of 1832. The ministers of the crown remained responsible to the unelected Crown, and not to the elected House of Commons. The Crown could not, of course, govern effectively without majorities in the Parliament, but these majorities were assembled as much by manipulation of the patronage (that is to say, by buying the votes it needed in the Commons) as by deference to the electorate. And the electors of the unreformed Parliament—with its “rotten” boroughs as well as equally “rotten” rural seats—were very far from the American standard of democratic representation in 1800. All this is, I believe, what Alexander Hamilton had in mind when he said that the British Constitution, purged of corruption, would become unworkable. The idea of a King or Queen who reigned but did not rule, and of a Prime Minister—and cabinet—that was responsible to a democratically elected legislature, had not yet been born. And so the idea of changing the executive whenever the vote of the people changed the majorities in the House of Commons, was yet unknown. The idea of a government resting upon the continuing and changing consent of the governed, registered in free elections, was a discovery of the American Founding, and was its precious gift to the world.

But the trail blazed in 1800 proved to be inconclusive. In 1860, the losing party in a national election refused to accept the results of the voting, and “seceded” to form another government. Here indeed was a supreme test of whether

societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force (Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 1, Modern Library edition, p. 3).

In his inauguration address, Lincoln declared that

A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments is the only true sovereign of a free people (*Collected Works*, IV, p. 268).

And so it remained for the American people to demonstrate to the world

that ballots are the rightful and peaceful successors of bullets; and that when ballots have fairly and constitutionally decided, there can be no successful appeal back to bullets . . . (*Ibid.*, p. 439).

Bloom to the contrary notwithstanding, this question of bullets versus ballots represented as fundamental a difference as any over which men have ever fought.

We noted Bloom's pronouncement above that the antebellum “proponents of slavery hardly dared assert that some human beings are made by nature to serve other human beings, as did Aristotle . . .” He has got the matter exactly backwards. The American defenders of Negro slavery did assert that that slavery was by nature just. They did so by asserting—long before Nazi theory—the biological inequality of the races. Aristotle says that someone of human birth would be servile by nature, if he differed from the generality of mankind “as widely as the soul does from the body and the human being from the lower animal” (*Politics*, 1254a16). The usefulness of such persons, by reason of the imperfection of their

rational faculties, "diverges little from that of animals; bodily service for the necessities of life is forthcoming from both . . ." (*Ibid.*, 1254b25). Aristotle only calls those slaves natural who are so defective mentally as to be functionally akin to the lower animals. In the modern world, such persons are called retarded, and are usually confined to what are somewhat euphemistically called "mental" institutions. (This is supposed to distinguish them from universities.) One might however ask, how could Aristotle expect such persons to form such a social class as slaves actually formed in the ancient world? The answer is that he did not. In Book VII of the *Politics* he says that "it is advantageous that all slaves should have their freedom set before them as a reward . . ." (1330a32). But a natural slave, properly so called, *cannot* be rewarded by freedom, any more than a horse or a dog or an ox. Aristotle's discussion of natural slavery leads to the conclusion that the actual institution of slavery rested, not on nature, but on convention or law. Its sanction was force, or justice understood as the interest of the stronger (cf. 1255a19 with 1255b15). Aristotle's proposal in Book VII of the *Politics*, applied to antebellum America, would have led to the policy that Lincoln commended: that of gradual, compensated emancipation. The fact that no such policy was politically conceivable—that is to say, that no legislation to this end could be adopted by constitutional means—made the Civil War inevitable. Slavery was in fact destroyed by the only means that could have destroyed it: military necessity.

The antebellum Southern defense of Negro slavery was much harsher than Bloom recognizes. Aristotle's argument has nothing to do with "race" (as in "racism," a term of modern politics). Nothing in Aristotle's argument would justify the enslavement of an intelligent Negro by a stupid white. Bloom thinks that American slavery was an "aberration" whose place was "settled" by the Declaration of Independence. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is shown by the following excerpts from the famous "cornerstone" speech of April 1861 (before the fall of Fort Sumter) by Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy.

The prevailing ideas entertained by [Jefferson] and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature: that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically.

Now, however, we know that

those ideas were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of the races. Our new government [the Confederate States of America] is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the negro is not the equal of the white man. That slavery—the subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition.⁵

Stephens further asserted that the natural inferiority of the Negro—his allegedly natural aptitude for slavery—was a discovery of modern science, and he compared it to Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood. He identifies the idea of the social, moral, and political progress of mankind with the progress of science. The Confederacy—based upon just such an advance of science—is therefore superior to the "old" Constitution of 1787. The notorious claims made later in behalf both of national Socialism and Marxism-Leninism—that they

represented political regimes grounded in the progress of scientific truth—were anticipated in principle by this most articulate spokesman for the Confederate South. Bloom's assertion that slavery "was an aberration that had to be extinguished" is itself merely the counterpart of Stephens' conviction in 1861 that opposition to Negro slavery was an aberration to be extinguished. Like all new truths, he said, it would take time for its diffusion and general recognition. With this recognition, however, would come acceptance of the justice and propriety of Negro slavery. Bloom simply dismisses—if he has not altogether forgotten—Lincoln's House Divided speech, which warned that the nation was at a crossroads, and that a decision had to be reached and taken, whether the nation was to become all free or all slave. Bloom writes as if "all slave" was never a possibility, and Lincoln an irresponsible inflammatory politician. He writes precisely as most "revisionist" American historians wrote before the publication of *Crisis of the House Divided* in 1959. In truth, however, the idea of progress can be used to vindicate either freedom or slavery. In 1861, however, no one could tell which would prevail.

The question of slavery extension went to the root of the meaning of free government, but it was the obverse of the question of whether free elections would continue to decide who would govern in a republic. By 1860 the doctrines of John C. Calhoun—which had taken the deepest root throughout the South—had completely divorced the idea of natural rights and human equality from the idea of political sovereignty, and hence from the idea of State sovereignty. It was this divorce which gave legitimacy to the idea of a constitutional right of secession. Popular sovereignty, seen in the light of the Declaration of Independence, is the collective expression of the equal right of each human person to be governed with his own consent under the rule of law. And the rule of law was itself understood to be the implementation, in accordance with the dictates of prudence, of "the laws of nature and of nature's God." These laws of nature were understood to be both moral and rational. They were understood to secure the equal rights to life, liberty, and property, and the pursuit of happiness of each human person. In severing the connection between natural rights and constitutional rights, Calhoun severed the connection between law and morality altogether. This fact was disguised to some extent because of Calhoun's typical mid-century commitment to the idea of progress—to the belief that those who were scientifically and technologically advanced were morally superior.

The discovery of gunpowder and the use of steam as an impelling force, and their application to military purposes have *forever* settled the question of the ascendancy between civilized and barbarous communities, in favor of the former. (*A Disquisition on Government*, Cralle ed., p. 62. Emphasis added.)

Calhoun assumed—as did his contemporary Karl Marx, whose *Manifesto* was written about the same time as the *Disquisition*—that the outcome of physical conflict, whether that of proletariat and bourgeoisie, or that of white and colored races—would indicate moral no less than material superiority.

State sovereignty, in Calhoun's thought, refers then ultimately to nothing more than the force (*assumed* to be moral) at the command of the government.

In his *Disquisition* there is no abstract or rational way to distinguish—as in the Declaration of Independence—between the just and the unjust powers of government. Those who are slaves are assumed to be rightfully slaves, and those who are masters, to be rightfully masters. And if the slaves suddenly arise and enslave the masters, then each will still be rightfully what he is! This latter was not something Calhoun contemplated, but it follows the logic of his argument. It is not for nothing that Calhoun has been rightly called (by Richard Hofstadter, in *The American Political Tradition*) "the Marx of the Master Class." This is to imply—correctly, I believe—that Calhoun anticipated, in certain fundamentals, the thought underlying the two great tyrannies of the twentieth century. If it was true, as Bloom says, that "slavery, aristocracy, monarchy, and theocracy" had been "laid to rest by the Declaration and the Constitution," then why had the thought of John C. Calhoun become so powerful? Why indeed was there ever a Civil War? (See "Defenders of the Constitution: Calhoun versus Madison," by the present writer. A Bicentennial Essay published by the Bicentennial Project of the University of Dallas.)

Next, I come to Bloom's account of "The Sixties." Bloom was forced to live through a revolutionary political event which he never really understood. It was an event in American history, the serious study of which Bloom has always regarded as superfluous. He looked upon the student radicals as Americanized versions of the Nazi youth of the 1930s, and there is some validity in this analogy. The deeper resemblance, however, is to the historicism and nihilism already present in the intellectual defense of the Confederacy—notably in the thought of both John C. Calhoun and Alexander Stephens. And there are important parallels to Calhoun in Thoreau, contemporaries who, ostensibly on opposite sides of the slavery question, were yet nearly perfect mirror images of each other. For the fact is that abolitionism and slavery, although theoretical antagonists, nonetheless collaborated in a way that, had it succeeded, would have crushed the Constitution. Their radical hostility and practical cooperation closely resembles the way in which in our century Nazis and Communists worked together to destroy the Weimar regime, which both hated worse than they hated each other. But Weimar lacked the strength of the American Founding, and Germany had no Lincoln.

The Black Power movement which brought Cornell University to its knees in 1969 (and drove Bloom into exile) was a transformation of the Civil Rights movement, in the aftermath of the victory of that movement by the enactment of the great civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965. In this transformation there was the same severance of the connection between civil and constitutional rights, on the one hand, and natural rights on the other, as had been earlier accomplished in the thought of Calhoun. Black Power became its own justification for whatever demands it could exact, just as the ownership of slaves once justified whatever the owners of slaves could exact. That the ideas animating the Black Power movement were at bottom the same as those of the leading defenders of slavery, however ironical, is nonetheless true. Bloom, however, is unconscious of this, because he is unconscious of the power and magnitude of the ideas in conflict that made the American Civil War perhaps the least avoidable great war ever.

Bloom's alienation from the American political tradition is illuminated by his pride in the fact that some of his students went among the rioters distributing a pamphlet which reprinted the passage from Plato's *Republic* (491c–492b) in which Socrates characterizes the *demos* itself as the greatest of sophists, the greatest of the corrupters of the young. Most radical students—and many who were not radical—would think that what it revealed most of all was Plato's antidemocratic prejudices. But the passage also lends itself easily to a Marxist interpretation—however spurious—because, according to the *Republic*, among the causes of the corruption is private property, and the leading cure for it is communism. It is difficult to imagine what effect—other than inflammatory—Bloom thought this Platonic passage might have had on the rioters.

One might reflect, however, as Bloom does not, that Socrates' characterization of democracy in the *Republic* is peculiarly inapplicable to the popular government envisaged by the American Founding Fathers. Theirs was a regime of law—in principle and aspiration, one of reason unaffected by desire. To the extent that human ingenuity could make it so, it was intended as a regime in which equal recognition was given to the requirements of wisdom and of consent. Consent was necessary however because, as Plato himself insisted, the designs of tyrants are always masked as the claims of wisdom.

Leo Strauss, in "On Classical Political Philosophy," remarks that

"aristocracy" (rule of the best) presented itself as the natural answer of all good men to the natural question of the best political order. As Thomas Jefferson put it, "That form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of [the] natural *aristoi* into the offices of government."⁶

Professor Colleen Sheehan of Villanova University has been kind enough to point out to me that in this celebrated essay, Strauss illustrates the central thesis of *classical* political philosophy—the nature of the best regime—with a quotation from a renowned letter of Jefferson to Adams. She has also pointed out that it appears to be the central passage in Strauss's essay. However one finally judges the wisdom of the Founding, there is little doubt that Strauss, like Jefferson, regarded this assimilation of aristocracy into democracy as its guiding thought. Elsewhere Strauss has written that

Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant.⁷

The American Founding, insofar as it is "democracy as originally meant" is thus inadequately characterized—to say the least—as something "low." After all, why would anyone need a ladder to ascend to it?

Yet Bloom is not altogether oblivious of the higher ground. He writes,

The students were unaware that the teachings of equality, the promise of the Declaration of Independence, the study of the Constitution, the knowledge of our history and many more things were the painstakingly earned and stored-up capital that supported them (p. 334).

Someone who can write of the American and French Revolutions as scenarios thought out beforehand by Locke and Rousseau, and who can say that "the English and American regimes [had been] founded according to [Locke's] instructions," is hardly in a position to reproach others for the lack of "the study of . . .

history." But were the students simply unaware of this history—as Bloom says here—or were they not in agreement with Bloom's own view of the Founding as "not very inspiring," and as spiritually impoverishing? Was the revolt of the sixties not at bottom a middle class revolt against the successful materialism of American life? Did not the students themselves—however misguided—believe that they were rejecting the low in favor of the high? Had not Bloom himself nurtured this revolt, even if it took forms that he did not expect or wish?

On February 21, 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln addressed the Senate of the State of New Jersey. He spoke of his recollection, from the earliest days of his childhood, of a small book, Weems's *Life of Washington*.

I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton . . . the crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed on my memory more than any single Revolutionary event; and you know, for you have all been boys, how these early impressions last longer than any others. I recollect thinking, then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for. I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that struggle (*Collected Works*, IV, pp. 235, 236).

Leo Strauss's—and Jefferson's—"democracy as originally meant," and Lincoln's "original idea" of what the Almighty had promised "to all the people of all the world" by this "his almost chosen people," is the noble legacy—the moral no less than the intellectual foundation—that was lacking in the education of the disaffected students. Lincoln's speech at Trenton, not Socrates' denunciation of democracy, is what was needed to illuminate the folly of the rioters who, in rejecting their inheritance,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,
Richer than all his tribe (*Othello*, v.ii).

Lincoln, who had opposed Douglas's idea of popular sovereignty on the same ground that Socrates had opposed Thrasymachus' cynical definition of justice as nothing but the interest of the stronger, could have provided a better introduction to the *Republic* than Bloom's. He could have shown the students the inner connection between the principles of classical political philosophy and those of the Declaration of Independence. Bloom could not do this because everything in his account of the American mind proves that he does not believe it to be true.

The argument of Bloom's book founders on the fact that he cannot decide between the classical rationalism that may be traced to Socrates and Socratic skepticism, and the rejection of all rationalism—and all skepticism—by Nietzsche and Heidegger. He is only certain that his "humanized" doubt is superior to any alternative, or to any decision—for example, in favor of the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Yet he concedes that the issue may yet be resolved.

Are Nietzsche and Heidegger right about Plato and Aristotle? They rightly saw that *the* question is here, and both returned obsessively to Socrates. Our rationalism is his rationalism. Perhaps they did not take seriously enough the changes wrought by modern rationalists and hence the possibility that the Socratic way might have avoided the modern impasse. But certainly all the philosophers, the proponents of reason, have something in common, and more or less directly reach back to Aristotle, Socrates' spiritual grandchild. A serious argument about what is most profoundly modern leads inevitably to the conclusion that study of the problem of Socrates is the one thing needful. It was Socrates who made Nietzsche and Heidegger look to the pre-Socratics. For the first time in four hundred years, it seems possible to begin all over again, to try to figure out what Plato was talking about, because it might be the best thing available (p. 310).

The study of the problem of Socrates was a life-long preoccupation of Leo Strauss, who was Bloom's teacher—and mine. Indeed, much of the foregoing passage might have been transcribed from Strauss's familiar conversation. In addition to his many writings on virtually all aspects of classical and modern political philosophy, Strauss wrote three books on Xenophon's Socratic writings, all of them with forewords by Bloom. In addition, he wrote *Socrates and Aristophanes*. Together, these constituted an exhaustive articulation of "the problem of Socrates," as it might be uncovered in non-Platonic (and pre-Socratic) sources. These writings of Strauss were in addition to his lengthy commentaries on the Platonic Socrates as he is presented in the *Republic*, the *Laws*, the *Statesman*, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and yet other dialogues. Of all this Bloom makes no mention. In his overview of the history of political philosophy, "From Socrates' *Apology* to Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede*" (pp. 243–312), there is no mention of Strauss.

In our time, Bloom writes, "it was Heidegger, practically alone, for whom the study of Greek philosophy became truly central . . ." (p. 309, 310). How anyone who had studied with Strauss—or had read "What Is Political Philosophy?" or "On Classical Political Philosophy"—could have written this is almost beyond comprehension. To speak thus of Heidegger, without mentioning Strauss, is like speaking of Hitler, without mentioning Churchill. For, if the truth were known, Strauss was as surely Heidegger's nemesis as Churchill was Hitler's. One can only conclude that if Bloom says that the one thing needful is the study of the problem of Socrates, and yet makes no mention of Strauss's study of the problem of Socrates (or of Greek philosophy), then he cannot think that Strauss's study is the needful one.

Strauss moreover never reached such a lame conclusion as Bloom's, that we might now—after four hundred years—"try to figure out what Plato was talking about, because it might be the best thing available." This makes the quest for the right way of life sound like the quest for prewar whiskey during the era of prohibition! In fact, Bloom's "to figure out" is an echo of a passage from Strauss's *Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion*:

For Spinoza there are no natural ends . . . He is therefore compelled to give a novel account of man's end (the life devoted to contemplation): man's end is not natural but rational, *the result of figuring it out* . . . He thus decisively prepares the modern notion of the "ideal" as a work of the human mind . . . as distinguished from an end imposed on man by nature. (*Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 241. Emphasis added.)

What Bloom is looking for is a "figuring out" of Plato which is in fact not Plato at all, but a modern "ideal," ostensibly grounded in Plato, but designed like all modern ideals, to gratify a passion, rather than to subordinate passion to reason. Bloom has no intention of facing squarely the issue of philosophical realism (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) versus nihilism (Nietzsche and Heidegger). He has no such intention because he knows that Strauss has presented the case for the former in terms he cannot refute but will not accept. Consider the following from the end of Strauss's chapter on "The Crisis of Modern Natural Right" in *Natural Right and History*. Rousseau, according to Strauss, had a reservation against society in the name of the state of nature.

To have a reservation against society in the name of the state of nature means to have a reservation against society without being either compelled or able to indicate the way of life or the cause or pursuit for the sake of which the reservation is made. The notion of a return to the state of nature on the level of humanity was the ideal basis for claiming a freedom from society which is not freedom for something (p. 294).

Rousseau, as interpreted here by Strauss, is the core of Bloom's soul. It is Rousseau who informs Bloom's reading of Plato's *Republic*, and who has tipped the balance within him irrevocably towards Nietzsche and Heidegger. Bloom's ideal of the university is just such a place where one can "return to the state of nature on the level of humanity." The attractiveness of this supposed return, says Strauss, is that

It was an ideal basis for an appeal from society to something indefinite and undefinable, to an ultimate sanctity of the individual as individual, unredeemed and unjustified. This was precisely what freedom came to mean for a considerable number of men.

In the "ultimate sanctity of the individual as individual"—meaning thereby a sanctity unfettered either by God or nature—Strauss has defined the core of modern liberalism. And Bloom, a quintessential liberal, is one of that "considerable number of men." Concluding, Strauss writes that

Every freedom which is freedom for something, every freedom which is justified by reference to something higher than the individual or than man as mere man, necessarily restricts freedom or, which is the same thing, establishes a tenable distinction between freedom and license. It makes freedom conditional on the purpose for which it is claimed.

Of course Bloom does not claim unconditional freedom for man in society—any more than did Rousseau. Nor does he attack those necessary conventions of academic life that make it comfortable and agreeable to persons like himself. But he does not admit within his own soul—nor does he teach—any idea of freedom that is conditional upon anything higher than man as man. That excludes both Athens and Jerusalem—and Leo Strauss.

Bloom to the contrary notwithstanding, we have known all along what Plato was talking about. He was talking about Justice (for example, in the *Republic*), and in the other dialogues about moderation, courage, law, and, in general, what was good and bad for man. The question about Plato is not what he was talking about, or even whether what he said appears wise or just, but whether the good and bad for man was founded in any ultimate reality, whether it existed by nature,

by convention (or law), or by some unknowable divine dispensation. For Bloom the question is not, What is Justice? It is, Which book about justice do you like best? At the end of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* Strauss, rejecting Machiavelli's teaching, says "that the notion of the beneficence of nature or of the primacy of the good must be restored by being rethought through a return to the fundamental experiences from which it is derived" (p. 299). In Strauss's rejection of progress in favor of return, the books of the classical philosophers would be indispensable to us as modern men, needing emancipation from our peculiarly modern cave. But Strauss, unlike Bloom, never failed to distinguish books from the "fundamental experiences" the books were meant to articulate. The "primacy of the Good"—the upper case emphasis is Strauss's—is a primacy with respect to all books and all art, even that of Plato.

Plato's dialogues always reveal to us far more of our ignorance of each subject discussed, than knowledge of that subject. In revealing our ignorance, however, they always reveal something of our knowledge of that ignorance. And that knowledge of ignorance always reveals something—never enough to satisfy us, but something—of what it is that we wish to know. It is enough to whet our appetites, to make us wish to go on, and know more of what it is that we do not know. The life lived in accordance with the knowledge of ignorance—the truly skeptical life, the examined and examining life—is, by the light of unassisted human reason, the best life. The regime that is best adapted to the living of this life is the best regime. All other lives and regimes are to be judged in relationship to this life and this regime. The goodness of the best life and the best regime is not arbitrary. It is not to be characterized—as Bloom suggests—as merely the "best thing available." On the contrary, that goodness is "according to nature." And hence the moral and intellectual virtues which are in harmony with this goodness are not arbitrary, but also are good "according to nature."

We return to Bloom's assertion that Nietzsche and Heidegger "returned obsessively to Socrates." They did so, he says because "Our rationalism is [Socrates'] rationalism." He adds, however, "perhaps they did not take seriously enough the changes wrought by the modern rationalists and hence the possibility that the Socratic way might have avoided the modern impasse." One might encapsulate the life work of Leo Strauss in Bloom's "perhaps." For Strauss proved, I believe, that "the changes wrought by modern rationalists" had mistakenly discredited the possibility that reason might discover the right way of life and the best regime. According to Strauss, it was not true that "Our [viz., modern man's] rationalism is his [viz., Socrates'] rationalism." Modern rationalism is "scientific" rationalism, which means that it explains the world and everything in it—including whatever is regarded as good or bad for man—in terms of what Aristotle called efficient and material causes, while denying the reality of what he called formal and final causes. All formal and final causes are understood in modern science and modern philosophy as epiphenomena or by-products of efficient and material causes. They are attempts to explain the high by the low.

This is as if one would try to understand Michelangelo's David as the result of the physical force applied by the artist to the chisel on the marble, omitting from one's explanation any reference to the sculptor's brain, purpose, and skill.

Socratic rationalism assumes that Michelangelo's brain had a purpose, even before his hand attempted to give it effect, or even before Michelangelo himself had discovered what it was. Indeed, it assumes that Michelangelo could not have discovered his purpose if it had not pre-existed—through all eternity—as a potentiality of his human nature. For modern philosophy, Michelangelo's art is simply an accidental outcome of the causes that generated Michelangelo, causes utterly indifferent to his art, as they were blind to anything intelligent or intelligible. The premises of modern philosophy are the result of a doubt so radical as to eliminate all further need to doubt: hence its dogmatism. The ambition of modern rationalism was to eliminate the skepticism that had accompanied Socratic rationalism, as its shadow. By replacing skepticism with dogmatism in philosophy, it would at the same time obviate any need for faith in God. Strauss, by showing that the self-destruction of reason in modern philosophy was the self-destruction of modern rationalism alone, prepared a return to premodern rationalism. By restoring Socratic skepticism, he restored not only Socratic rationalism, but the place that that skepticism left for biblical faith.

Nietzsche and Heidegger represented the final disillusionment with—and rejection of—modern rationalism, although they seem at the same time to have rejected all rationalism. Not seeing—as did Strauss—any alternative to modern rationalism, however, they discovered: nothing. Since there is no purpose, good or evil, in any reality outside of man, all purpose in life must be willed by man. But the will has no source of guidance outside itself. What one wills as good is good. What one wills as evil, is evil. The will is its own justification, because there can be no other. Hitler's famous propaganda film "Triumph of the Will," whatever its defects as art, is an authentic manifestation of Heidegger's teaching. Here then is the core cause of modern nihilism, and of the belief that there is no ground for the existence of God, or of the noble and good things, except as useful fictions or pleasing illusions. These must be willed by man, although they are believable by *hoi polloi* only if their origin is concealed. For the true Thinker—who replaces the Philosopher—there is neither myth nor reality. The Thinker—having triumphed over the terror of the abyss—alone lives without illusions, without either hope or fear, but in an unprecedented freedom. Bloom lives with considerable discomfort in this freedom, but he has not yet figured out anything for which he would give it up.

¹Lincoln, Address in Independence Hall, Feb. 22, 1861. *Collected Works*, IV, p. 240.

²Basic Writings of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Philip S. Foner, Halcyon House, p. 802.

³Modern Library Edition, p. 287.

⁴On Kirk's atrocities, see "What were the 'Original Intentions' of the Framers of the Constitution of the United States?" in *The University of Puget Sound Law Review*, Spring 1987, esp. at 380–83.

⁵*The Political History of the Great Rebellion*, Edward McPherson ed., Washington, D.C., 1865, p. 103.

⁶In *What Is Political Philosophy?* Free Press, 1959, pp. 85, 86.

⁷*Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, Basic Books, 1968, p. 5.